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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted of teachers of disadvantaged children during the 1979-80 school year in Dade County, Florida. The study involved nearly 100 inner city elementary teachers who were identified as being the most effective teachers in their schools. The teachers responded to a lengthy questionnaire which asked very detailed questions about how they worked with their children. Almost all of the questions were open-ended. The most repeated theme to emerge from the study was that structure and organization and careful planning are of primary importance in the inner city classroom. Clear rules and regulations were established from the first day of school and were closely adhered to. Most of the teachers used some type of structured motivational system in their classroom, with positive reinforcement for good behavior frequently taking the form of rewards. Almost all of the teachers emphasized that their success came from their love of children, their respect for children, and the ability to let children know they care about them. The questionnaire with responses by categories is appended. (JD)

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Successful Teaching of Disadvantaged Children: From the Perspective of 94 Title I Elementary School Teachers Who Were Identified As Being The Most Effective In Their Schools

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INTRODUCTION

What makes an exceptional teacher of disadvantaged children? How do these teachers manage their classrooms for maximum effectiveness? Are there commonalities in the way in which they do things? Are black teachers necessarily better at working with black disadvantaged children than are white teachers? Should teachers of the disadvantaged be better trained and more experienced? Are special equipment and supportive services needed in order to effectively teach disadvantaged children?

In order to answer these and other questions related to the education of disadvantaged children, three investigators, in Dade County Florida, a University Professor in Psychology, at Florida International University, an Inner City Title I school principal and an elementary school teacher of disadvantaged children, teamed up to conduct a study of effective teachers of disadvantaged children.

The study was conducted during the 1979-1980 school year, and it included all of the Title I elementary schools in the North, North Central and South Central Areas of the Dade County Public School System. The study involved nearly 100 inner city elementary school teachers. These teachers were identified by their principals as being the three most effective teachers in their schools.

The researchers constructed a lengthy questionnaire which asked very detailed questions about what and how these teachers worked with their children. Professional data regarding the training and backgrounds of the teachers were also included. It is important, indeed crucial, to note that almost all of the questions asked by interviewers were <u>open-ended</u>, such that little or no structure at all was established for their responses. The researchers wanted to see if certain themes would emerge independently of response contamination resulting from such devices as multiple choice items or checklists.

This approach required consensual validation in that each of the completed questionnaires were read independently by three educators, each of them categorizing the responses as they saw fit. The senior researcher then collapsed these categories for display in the report.

It should be noted that no similar study of this kind could be found in an exhaustive review of the literature. As far as the investigators could establish, this is the first study in which the teaching strategies of effective teachers of disadvantaged children have been documented through the direct testimony of the teachers themselves. The study is unique also in that it is a teacher based study which deals with the practical "how to" aspect of teaching disadvantaged children. Subsequently, the study may be viewed by some as refreshingly atheoretical.

As the study is read, it should become clear that it is a study which was written for teachers and school administrators and decision makers in education, rather than for other researchers. How those for whom the study was written will in fact use these findings is a matter which is yet to be determined.

The initial cost of the study was provided by the Office of University Outreach and Services of Florida International University, which was headed by the senior investigator at the onset of the research. The bulk of the study however was unsupported and was completed by the team with minimum university support. The school system itself approved the work, but was not asked to support the study finanacially.

DISCUSSION/IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has provided a rare opportunity for teachers of disadvantaged children who have been identified as among the best teachers of such children, to describe in detail how they teach. It is a study which deals with the practical tasks of managing a classroom of disadvantaged children rather than with educational theory about how such classes should be managed.

What have we learned?

First, it is clear from this study that disadvantaged children can be effectively managed in a traditional classroom setting. Many teachers who have difficulties working with these children are not entirely certain that it is possible to handle thirty or so such children without special assistance and supports of various kinds. These teachers demonstrate that not only is is possible to effectively teach disadvantaged children, but that it is a job which can be rewarding and fulfilling as well. Moreover, they demonstrate that these children do not necessarily require elaborate and expensive support personnel and systems in order to be taught well. The study clearly establishes that the teacher, her level of preparedness, her organizational abilities, her self-confidence and above all, her love for the children are the most crucial factors in the teaching formula for classroom success with disadvantaged children.

What makes an effective teacher of the disadvantaged? Certain themes emerge from the study.

The most repeated theme is Structure and Organization: You don't fly by the seat of your pants in disadvantaged classrooms. The kids will wipe you out. Teachers must know exactly where they are going and how they intend to get there-for virtually every moment of the classroom day. One does not simply "let things happen." Nothing is left to chance and at least in the initial stages of the school year, the classroom is not a place for creative exploration through which the child "discovers himself." This comes later, but first and foremost the rules must be learned and respected. Without this the teacher and the children face a year of chaos, confrontation and confusion.

In support of this conclusion consider what some of the teachers in the study said:

> "I am very consistent with the rules. We have rules for everything - even how to sit and how to put your chair under the desk. You don't change from one day to the next, you must be consistent."

> "I am very tough in the beginning. I ease up as the year progresses. The way I train them, the first 6 weeks is important for the rest of the year".

> "The class and I set up rules and standards the very first hour of the very first day."

> "My program is very structured. I believe in that because I have seen the results; the more structure we have, the more successful we are."

> "Plan!, plan!, plan!. Keep the children busy every moment of the day."

> "I have follow-up work and individual activities ready so he is not left to find something to do. They feel secure knowing what they have to do."

> "I try to be absolutely sure of what I'm going to do, because they can sense when I'm not. You have to have things snap right along. Anytime you're not sure, they take advantage of that."

> "Always stay more than two or three steps ahead."

We find it particularly worthy of note that so many of the teachers identified in this study (59%) use some type of structured motivational system in their classrooms. They consistently reward their children in tangible terms for displaying appropriate classroom behaviors. They do not merely expect their children to behave appropriately and to learn; they assure that their children receive explicit benefits for doing so.

In response to this issue, quotes from some of the teachers are given below.

> "I use a point system. It is a very good motivator. I give points for conduct when coming and going from the building. I take the photograph of the top student and display it in the showcase."

> "I use a point system for reading assignment completion. On Fridays, the child with the most points gets a Happy Gram to his/her parents."

> "I post behaviors such as returning homework, staying on task, coming on time at the beginning of the year. Each day the students earn points which they can trade in. The 50 point box has crayons, marbles and erasers, the 100 point box has coloring books, comic books and balls and the 150 point box has a kite, airplanes, nail polish, bracelets, etc. They can "buy" at the end of any day."

> "Every Friday if students have enough points they have 30 minutes in which they can play with the games they want. They can also deposit points and buy things such as candy, jewelry and gifts for parents."

"I have identified six behaviors including coming in quietly and finishing work on time. Students get a star for the day if they have gotten a point for each of those behaviors. On Fridays they get rewards and notes to parents for their stars. At the end of each quinmester, the one with the most stars gets a game or book. At the end of the year, the one with the most stars gets a trophy."

"Every time children display good behavior individually or as a class, a crayon is put in a jar. When the jar is full, the entire class gets a treat."

It is evident that the best teachers of the disadvantaged are not new, inexperienced teachers who are simply passing through poor schools on their way to other professional assignments. They are, in effect, teachers with many years of experience. Their average number of years of teaching experience is fourteen. They are also teachers who have spent most of their teaching careers in disadvantaged schools. The teachers in this study have been teaching in disadvantaged schools for an average of eleven years. Indeed, they are teachers who seem to <u>prefer</u> teaching in these schools. In terms of their level of training more than half of the teachers in the study hold masters degrees.

Although in this study most of the children are black, we find that half the group of teachers, identified as most effective teachers of disadvantaged children in the Dade County School System are white. This is especially important in that some educators and many parents today believe that black teachers are necessarily the most effective teachers of black children. It should be noted however that the proportion of black teachers identified for the study is significantly higher than the proportion of black teachers in the Dade School System.

One of the most revealing and important themes to emerge from the study is that when asked in an open ended fashion, what they thought accounted for their success as effective teachers, most of the teachers said that it was their love for these children. Comments such as the ones below were typical.

> "I feel the key is to respect children as people and show them that you care."
>
> "You must be willing to let the children become a part of you."
>
> "Nothing unique, I love my children and my job.
>
> "Putting feeling in your teaching. The children detect when we care and are involved. They appreciate everything when they can tell you have put in a lot of effort, a little of your heart in it. They know when you are just doing the job."
>
> "I think somehow I have the ability to let students know I care about them. I also have the ability to laugh at myself. I let them know I'm human."

It becomes clear then that teachers who do not feel especially positive about children, particularly, about disadvantaged children, should not be expected to effectively teach these children. That which has been written in many teaching manuals is verified in the trenches - you have to love them.

CONCLUSIONS

School systems with significant numbers of disadvantaged children should review the Dade School Study in close detail. They should establish training programs which will allow them to incorporate these findings into the in-service training of their teachers and other school personnel. Much of this study focuses upon very practical, procedural and organizational techniques which are used by nearly 100 effective teachers of disadvantaged children. If shown the why, what and the how of effective classroom management, and teaching techniques, many classrooms which are not now functioning at acceptable levels can be assisted to do so.

Many school systems today are placing increasing importance upon upgrading the skills of their teachers. Too often such training is abstract and irrelevant as viewed by many teachers. With the several everyday and practical problems confronting them, these teachers may not especially care about Piaget but would love to learn how to save valuable teaching time in moving their children from place to place within and outside of their classrooms. As important as early childhood psycho-social development may be, many teachers would prefer to develop more effective ways of getting their children to remain on task in their basic skills groups.

This study establishes convincingly that disadvantaged children respond well to certain kinds of classroom and academic structure and to teachers who use particular teaching and classroom management styles. The teachers who participated in this study are perhaps better qualified than anyone to tell us what does and what does not seem to work with disadvantaged children.

The authors of this study are considering developing seminars and workshops for teachers which might utilize the teachers who were involved in this research as the principal trainers of other teachers. They also intend to pursue the development of a series of video tapes or possibly a film of these teachers in their classrooms. These products could then be used in the training of other teachers in the Dade School System as well as in other interested school systems.

THE QUESTIONAIRE WITH RESPONSES BY CATEGORIES

ITEM #1 What kind of planning and preparation do you do to assure that your program is well structured?

Response Categories

A. Plan daily, weekly, long range or by objectives

48%

B. Provide prescriptive learning activities, i.e., individualized lesson planning

30%

C. Maintain daily consistent routine, i.e., teacher knows precisely what she/he is going to do each moment of each day

18%

Comment

As can be seen above, nearly half the teachers indicated that the type of planning and preparation they use is to plan on a daily, weekly, or long range basis or to plan by objectives. Thirty per cent indicated that they provide prescriptive learning activities. In essence, effective teachers structure their programs by good planning and prescriptive teaching activities.

ITEM #2 What techniques or strategies do you use to keep your students on-task?

Response Categories

A. Use of a behavior modification system or a structured distribution of rewards

40%

B. Provide a variety of interesting, motivating materials

22%

C. Implement a structured, consistent routine wherein students know what they are expected to do

22%

D. Maintain continuous close teacher supervision of students

16%

E. Good communication and rapport between teacher, student and parents

13%

F. Prescribe classwork that is at the students' appropriate academic level

11%

Comment

The crucial message here is structure. Nearly two thirds of the respondents indicated that they used a structured reward system and/or a well established routine in which everyone knew what was expected.

ITEM #3 What provisions do you make in your classroom for a student or students who are working at a level considerably below the rest of the class?

Response Categories

A. Individualized prescriptive lesson planning

29%

B. One to one instruction is provided by teacher

27%

C. Modification and selection of appropriate materials

26%

D. Instruction delivered by peer tutors and/or teacher's aide

24%

E. Provision of success oriented activities designed to build student self confidence

12%

Comment

In this item 56% of the top teachers show that their way of working with students who are below grade level involves planning individual lessons for those children and/or making the time to work with them on a one to one basis. It is noteworthy that over 30% of the teachers believe that success oriented activities which build student self-confidence and/or the use of peer tutors, which is so easily implementable, work well for them and their students.

ITEM #4 What types of materials or activities do you use to provide the structure during direct instruction?

Response Categories

A. Use of chalkboard

45%

B. Use of workbooks and other books

42%

C. Utilization of Audio-Visual Equipment

32%

D. Visual aids including charts, posters, flash cards, flannel board, maps and globes

31%

E. Use of manipulative, concrete objects

15%

F. Educational Games

10%

Comment

With all the hoopla over the many available and expensive educational gimmicks and gadgets, good teachers still depend primarily upon the chalkboard first to provide structure in working with their students in direct instruction. Refreshing isn't it?

ITEM #5 What materials or activities have been most effective for use as non-teacher directed, independent activities?

Response Categories

A. Use of commercially made games and materials

64%

B. Use of audio visual materials

34%

C. A variety of books, i.e.; story books, newspapers, textbooks, workbooks, etc.

23%

D. Use of teacher made materials

18%

E. Worksheets and dittoes

18%

Comment

A variety of materials were reported as effective as non-teacher directed activities with a large majority of these materials being commercially produced games, A/V materials and books. The theory that disadvantaed students need materials that are either teacher made or greatly modified in order that they be unusually appealing and motivating is not supported by the respondents.

ITEM #6 What particular start up procedures do you use as each school year begins?

Response Categories

A. Establish class rules and set clear expectations

84%

B. Conduct activities which are designed to help teacher and students become acquainted, i.e.; learning students' names quickly; creating a family atmosphere in the classroom; students and teacher talk about themselves

23%

C. Make contact with parents

18%

Comment

This item makes one of the most important points of the study. Good teachers establish rules and they make sure that their students know what is expected of them. 84% of the teachers in this study say so.

ITEM #7 What techniques do you use to settle down your class when the noise level gets too high?

Response Categories

A. Teacher stops talking and waits. Through non-verbal behavior i.e., sitting down, folding arms, standing in front of the class and staring at the class, the teacher sends the message to the class; "I won't go on until you settle down"

27%

B. Teacher flicks the lights on and off

26%

C. Teacher instructs students to be quiet

17%

D. Use of non-verbal messages, i.e., teacher stares at student/s with disapproving expression

16%

E. Students are instructed to put their heads down on their desks

11%

F. Teacher Counts, i.e.; children know they are to get quiet before the teacher reaches a certain number

10%

G. Teacher rings a bell or a chime to regain

9%

Comment

These teachers apparently do not fall into the trap of trying to out talk their students. They have established ways of letting students know when they are too noisy. They are not passive teachers who accept excessive noise and disorder in their classrooms.

ITEM #8 What techniques do you use that help you to have your class get in line, move through the building, use the rest rooms or water fountain, etc.?

Response Categories

A. Utilize student line leaders or monitors

27%

B. Students get in line using various techniques, i.e., by alphabetical order, color of eyes, color of clothing, etc.

26%

C. The "best" group gets in line first. i.e.; the group that has completed their work quickest, most accurately or most quietly

16%

D. Use of praise, rewards or implementation of a behavior modification system

16%

E. Teachers reference to established class rules

13%

Comment

59% of the respondents use line monitors or in some way tie in their reinforcement system with the process of moving students through the buildings. Good teachers evidently do not simply move their students as chance would have it. Rather they structure the movement of their students in order to maximize control.

ITEM #9 What procedures have you established for students moving within the room? For example from center to center or from instruction to independent activities?

Response Categories

A. Students move about the room only as necessary to use materials required for assigned work

21%

B. A timer or a bell signals students to prepare to move to the next activity

19%

C. The classroom routine is consistent, therefore students know where and when to go without teacher direction

19%

D. A posted rotation chart that indicates where students should be at a given time guides student movement

18%

Comment

In response to this item, a variety of methods are used with almost equal frequency by the teachers.

ITEM #10 We are using a scale of one through five with one meaning very often and five meaning never. In attempting to modify students' behavior, how often do you use each of the following techniques? Remember, one means very often, five means never.

	Average of Teachers' Responses
Using praise	1.17
Using non-verbal gestures (i.e.; smile, pat on the back, nod)	1.20
Using edibles (cookies, raisins)	3.36
Awarding special privileges, such as monitors or line leaders	2.26
Private conference with student/s	1.70
Using learning or behavior contracts	3.63
Sending home a note of praise	2.29
Withholding recess or other activities	3.45
Paddling within the restraints of school board policy	4.20
Writing lines	4.45
Sending student/s to the principal	4.28
Pointing out another student or students as a model for appropriate behavior	2.76
Sending student/s to another room	4.69
Keeping the student/s after school	4.05
Raising your voice	3.18
Lowering your voice	2.37
Turning off the lights	3.59
Having student/s put head/s on desk	3.78

ITEM #11 Do you use any motivational or contingency system with your students? For example, a token economy system or a point system?

Response Categories

YES 59% NO 41%

(If Yes) Please describe it, including the types of incentives or rewards, the schedule of reinforcement and the behaviors that are rewarded.

Response Categories

The teachers tended to respond only to portions of this question, i.e.; either the kind of system or the kinds of rewards. However, the types of motivational systems that were described ranged from behavior checklists or charts with stars to complex token economy systems utilizing points and/or coupons. The kinds of rewards most frequently mentioned by the respondents were free choice of an activity, certificates or other positive parental contact, edibles, stickers and small prizes.

ITEM #12 What is the major purpose for which you contact parents?

Response Categories

A. To discuss student's behavior problems

44%

B. To discuss student's unsatisfactory academic progress

29%

C. To report student's academic progress or improvement

25%

D. To become acquainted with the parent

16%

E. To request that the parent support the student's academic program, i.e.; tutoring child or reinforcing skills taught in school

12%

Comment

73% of the respondents contact the parents of their students for essentially negative reasons, i.e., behavioral or academic problems. It would appear that even the best teachers do not establish and maintain contact with parents in order to provide positive input about their students.

ITEM #13 Do you believe that inner-city students would benefit from a different educational program than students from affluent backgrounds?

Response Categories

YES 51% NO 49%

(If yes) In which grades and in what major ways should the educational program differ?

Comment

The respondents clearly split on this item. Of those who said "yes" there was no discernible agreement as to why they believed so. Of those who answered no, the following kinds of answers were given:

"Children from affluent background probably have more experience, but inner city kids can do the work if they have the attention they need."

"Everything should be equal-mainly the teachers need to be equalized."

"Everything can be offered to the child to the degree to which he is receptive."

"All children have the right to the same program. Shouldn't put a stigma on those children. Present it to them in a different way, but not a different program."

ITEM #13 continued

"You try to individualize according to where they're at. The difference is their ability, not their background."

"I think that you can teach a child anything you want if it is on a level of his understanding. Lots of kids give us problems because they are not treated fairly."

ITEM #14 What unique teaching techniques or strategies have contributed to your success as a teacher?

Response Categories

A. The quality of the teacher's human relationship with the students, i.e.; loving the students, respecting and caring about them, being honest with them, listening to them, keeping lines of communication open

50%

B. Working very hard and planning carefully

18%

C. Place emphasis on making students feel successful and special

13%

Comment

Perhaps the clearest message to come from this study is the belief independently expressed by half of the best identifiable teachers of the disadvantaged child that loving, respecting and caring about their students has contributed more than anything else to their success as teachers. This is often expressed in textbooks for teachers, but here it is verified in the field by top quality teachers of disadvantaged children.

ITEM #15 What is the highest academic degree that you hold?

Average of Respondents

43 % Bachelors Degree 54 % Masters Degree 01 % Doctoral Degree 02 % Other (i.e.;Specialist)

ITEM #15b In what subject did you major?

Response Categories

57 % Elementary Education

18 % Supervision/Administration

10 % Early Childhood

04 % Curriculum/Instruction

11 % Other

ITEM #16a Was there any particular course or portion of your training which best prepared you for this teaching job?

Response Categories

YES 63% NO 37%

ITEM #16b (If Yes) Please describe

Response Categories

A. Internship or student teaching

19%

ITEM #16c For what areas of your job did your training least prepare you?

Response Categories

A. Establishing and maintaining good discipline procedures

14%

B. Paperwork, i.e.; forms, progress charts, etc.

12%

C. Problems unique to inner city schools

11%

ITEM #17 How many years have you taught in the public school system?

14 years (group average)

ITEM #18 How many years have you taught disadvantaged students?

11 years (group average)

ITEM #19 How many years have you taught in <u>this</u> school?

8.5 years (group average)

ITEM #20 What is the grade level you are currently teaching?

Grade 3 (average grade level)

ITEM #21 Race of respondents

Black - 50%

Non Hispanic White - 35%

Latin - 15%

Other - .02%

ITEM #22 Sex of respondents

Female 87%

Male 13%

APPENDIX I

DETAILS OF THE DESIGN OF THE STUDY

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

Elementary school teachers, who were identified as effective, were personally interviewed, using a structured interview format. The data collected was analyzed and organized, using consensual validation. The results of that analysis appear in this report.

Selection of the Subjects.- By means of an economic survey of all schools in Dade County, Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Title I funds are allocated to schools in the most economically deprived areas of the county. The North, North Central and South Central Areas of the Dade County Public Schools have a concentration of Title I schools and also lie geographically in the urban area of the county. Therefore, principals of Title I elementary schools in these three areas were contacted by letter requesting that they submit to the investigators the names of the three most effective classroom teachers at their schools. The design of the study was outlined, confidentiality was assured and a commitment was made to disseminate the findings of the study to the principals.

On the basis of principals' responses, ninety four teachers were identified. These teachers were subsequently contacted by letter requesting their cooperation in agreeing to be interviewed. The letter was followed by a phone contact at which time an appointment was made for the interview.

Structure of the Interview. The interview was designed to collect data relevant to classroom management, promoting "on task" behavior, class organization, motivational or contingency systems, parental contact and unique strategies or techniques. All of the questions were open ended except one which referred to specific techniques for modifying student behavior and the response to this question was based on a Likert scale. Additionally, data was collected from the respondents concerning their level of education and years of experience, grade level taught and ethnicity was noted.

Interviewers. Interviewers were trained to make the initial phone contact, to schedule the interview and also instructed in the use of the designed interview format. Since the initial contact was an important step in promoting the accessibility of the interviewers, time was spent preparing the interviewers for questions from the teachers during this phone conversation. Interviewers were given suggested responses to possible refusals. With reference to the actual interview, instructions were given to read the questions precisely, use neutral probes and to write down everything offered as a response. Interviewers observed a role playing of an interview as part of their training. Interviewers were provided with an instructional package to serve as guidelines for their role in the data collection.

The design of the interview was field tested by administering it to a group of ten teachers who work in Title I schools. As a result of this pilot process, questions were modified with some eliminated. The intent was to gain as much information as possible within a reasonable length of time. With the final product the average time for completion of an interview was fifty minutes. In most instances the teachers interviewed were pleased to be able to share their successful techniques.

Consensual Validation. The data collected were analyzed using consensual validation. The interview was structured with open ended questions. Assigning responses to predetermined categories was impossible. Therefore, three educators, with Masters Degree or higher, working independently classified the responses into categories. The responses, of the ninety-four teachers, to each question were studied, one question at a time. Similar responses were assigned to categories, judgmentally, by each educator. Within each question, tallies of responses per category were totaled. The data, as organized by the three persons working independently, were then consolidated for comparison. A fourth educator, doctorate level, experienced in research, examined the consensual data of the previous three researchers. Some of the categories were collapsed and the data refined. Percentages for each response were then computed.